



August 6, 2014

RE: Women and Children Targeted for Violence by Central American Gangs

To Whom It May Concern,

I write to provide information on Central American transnational criminal organization (“TCOs” or “gangs”) violence and, gang violence directed towards females and their children, particularly those who resist recruitment and flee gangs in their countries of origin. It is my opinion that, just as women and children are targeted for mistreatment and abuse by spouses and family members because it is believed that these individuals are property and may be harmed with impunity, Central American gangs similarly single out women and children for forced recruitment and subsequent violence. While many women and children in Central America are subject to general harms as a result of societal factors and ineffective police protections, women and children in these countries who refuse recruitment into gangs face increased and substantially different harms.

In the societies of Guatemala, El Salvador and Honduras, communities see women and children targeted by gangs as a distinct group, as a direct result of their vulnerability, susceptibility to harm, and the steps taken to avoid harms. In communities where gang activity is pervasive and accepted by the majority, those women and children who are targeted for gang recruitment and refuse, are recognized as a distinct subset, apart from the community.

I am professor and chair of anthropology at Lehman College where I also serve as the director of the Center for Human Rights and Peace Studies. I am also a member of the doctoral faculty at City University of New York. I am an Affiliated Scholar at the Center for the Study of Genocide and Human Rights, Rutgers University. Since 1990, I have conducted extensive field research with Maya communities in Guatemala, Afro-Colombian and indigenous peace communities in Colombia, and Colombian refugee communities in Ecuador. I have authored several books including *Buried Secrets: Truth and Human Rights in Guatemala* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), *Violencia y Genocidio en Guatemala* (FyG Editores, 2003), *Guatemala: Del Genocidio al Femicidio* (FyG Editores, 2008), and co-authored the Guatemalan Forensic Anthropology Foundation's report to the Commission for Historical Clarification (the Guatemalan truth commission).

I hold a certificate in Human Rights Law from the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights in Costa Rica. I have received numerous awards for my work and research including a John Simon Guggenheim Fellowship, the Bunting Peace Fellowship at Harvard's Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Studies, a United States Institute for Peace grant, a Fulbright Teaching/Research Award, a Rockefeller Fellowship for research on

violence, a MacArthur Consortium Fellowship, and the Early Career Award of the Peace Society of the American Psychological Association, among others. I have served as a consultant and provided invited expert briefings on human rights to private foundations as well as to governmental, nongovernmental and United Nations entities. I received my Ph.D. in anthropology from Stanford University in 2000.

Having traveled and carried out research throughout Central America, I have seen that women and children are specifically targeted for harm and violence by gangs and how this violence has intensified over time. This treatment mirrors the suffering that women and children endure at all levels of Central American society from a variety of persecutors. Additionally, women and children targeted for harm are considered a specific group within their respective societies.

Central American women and children are subjected to violence and abuse within intimate and family relationships because perpetrators know that their victims are unable to defend themselves or receive government protection. Abusers view women and children as property and inflict violence and harm on them because of their status in these relationships.

Gangs target women and children for harm for these same reasons: they view them as property, as things that can be harmed without consequence. Violent deaths of women and children is a daily occurrence in Central America and the gangs take advantage of this violence and exacerbate it, selecting those viewed as valueless for gang recruitment and additional violent harm when individuals refuse the gang's demands.

Once targeted, women and children cannot escape the gangs or receive protection from their violence. First, the gangs are pervasive in society. There are no safe geographic areas or classes within society that protect women and children from gang recruitment or violence. Second, the gangs wield political power and act as quasi-governments in the communities that they control. Finally, the gangs act with impunity: even after recruitment or violent harms are inflicted on a woman or child, gang members are not held accountable for their behavior. Simply put, the Central American governments have lost all ability to control the TCOs and are sometimes linked to their violence.

Central American governments fail to protect women and children from violence perpetrated by gangs and TCOs by (1) commission of violence; (2) toleration of TCO violence; and (3) omission of state responsibility to investigate and sanction gang and TCO violence. When not commissioning the violence through state agents and clandestine groups, the Central American governments tolerate the violence because of current or previous ties to high level TCO leaders or lateral relationships between local gang/TCO leaders and local police. Lastly, Central American governments fail to carry out their responsibility to protect women and children because they do not investigate or sanction gang and TCO violence. For example, prosecution rates for violent crimes and homicide are less than 5%.

I have worked extensively with rural and urban indigenous and ladina women regarding gender-based violence carried out by state and family perpetrators. While initially exploring state violence during the Guatemalan Genocide, my recent research has focused on the continuum of gender violence from the past to the present, including the particular ways that traditional cultural practices become instruments of repression and how these instruments of repression continue to mark Central American society. Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador have some of the highest female homicide rates in the world. All three are states with histories of violent conflict, places where modern governments have been unable to protect citizens from harm at the hands of the gangs, and where women and children have been similarly unable to receive protection from intimate partner violence and family violence.

During the second half of the 20th Century, internal armed conflict was rife in this part of Central America. Indeed, thousands of women were subjected to sexual violence and torture prior to being assassinated by state agents. Children were also targeted for forced recruitment into the civil patrols, where they received arms training and were forced to follow army orders. Orphans were numerous because militaries killed parents. Older siblings became child guardians without the knowledge or capacity to parent effectively. Educational systems were destroyed, as were the structures of civil society in these countries.

Poverty, violence and a broken generation of survivors of past harm has further augmented cycles of familial, intimate partner and community violence that were already present in Central America. Family relations and violence against women reflect the legacies of past state violence. As in the past, men hold the monopoly on the use of violence and women and children are targeted as their victims.

A result of this cyclical violence coupled with the disintegration of the Central American governments, criminal organizations rose to fill a void in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador, acting as miniature governments beyond the reach of the state.

The principal TCOs or gangs in Central America are the Mara Salvatrucha (MS13) and their rivals, the 18th Street gang. The gangs operate principally in Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador and are involved in a range of criminal activities including robbery, extortion, kidnapping, prostitution, murder, and trafficking in drugs, stolen vehicles, weapons and persons. These groups are not controlled by the respective states or police forces.

For this reason, present-day Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador are often deemed 'failed states'. The governments are powerless to control the gangs or protect their citizens from violence and forced gang recruitment because leaders are often involved in the high levels of TCOs or are bought off by major traffickers. The respective publics live in a state of helplessness, defenseless and abandoned by the police and government officials who are either implicated in the violence or fail to meet their responsibilities to protect women and children.

Outside of the very rich, who retain private security forces and live in gated communities, there is no police presence or protection for lower or middle class Central Americans. When contacted, police either do not respond or fail to engage in meaningful criminal investigations. Often times, citizens are re-victimized by police if they report a crime. Gangs essentially own neighborhoods and have the freedom to operate and, in the absence of state police presence, to dispense 'justice' to those who fall into disfavor.

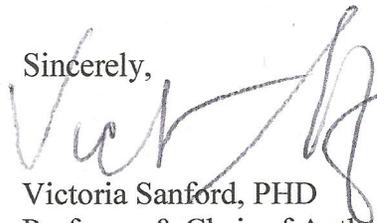
In this context, an individual who flees or goes into hiding to avoid harm is perceived as opposing the gangs and also a threat to structures of corruption within local governments. This means, paradoxically, that when women and children flee or hide from harms feared by gang members, they increase their susceptibility to future harm from gangs and local police.

Targeted for recruitment and additional harm when they refuse to comply with gang demands, TCO members see women and children as individuals who may be harmed without consequence. In the Central American states, those considered 'easy targets' for gang recruitment and violence are perceived as a distinct group both by gang members and society more broadly. Women and children are recognized as vulnerable to harm because of their youth, gender, social stature, and relationship status of that as property. After an individual refuses recruitment, refuses to accede to the demands of the gang or flees, she makes herself even more of a target.

In light of Central America's history of past violence and the vacuum created by the failure of these states in the present day, transnational criminal organizations have risen to prominence. These groups target those who are considered to be at the lowest rung of the societal ladder for recruitment and harm. As a result of belonging to this group, women and children are visible and considered to constitute a distinct societal group in the eyes of gang members and members of the broader society. Having been targeted for gang recruitment and violence in the past, refused such recruitment and fled their countries in fear, women who *return* to Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador become particular targets for future retributive violence. Because of their past, women and children who are forced to return to these countries after fleeing gang recruitment are especially visible within their communities and thus particularly vulnerable to future harms at the hands of gangs.

I appreciate the opportunity to share this information with you.

Sincerely,



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